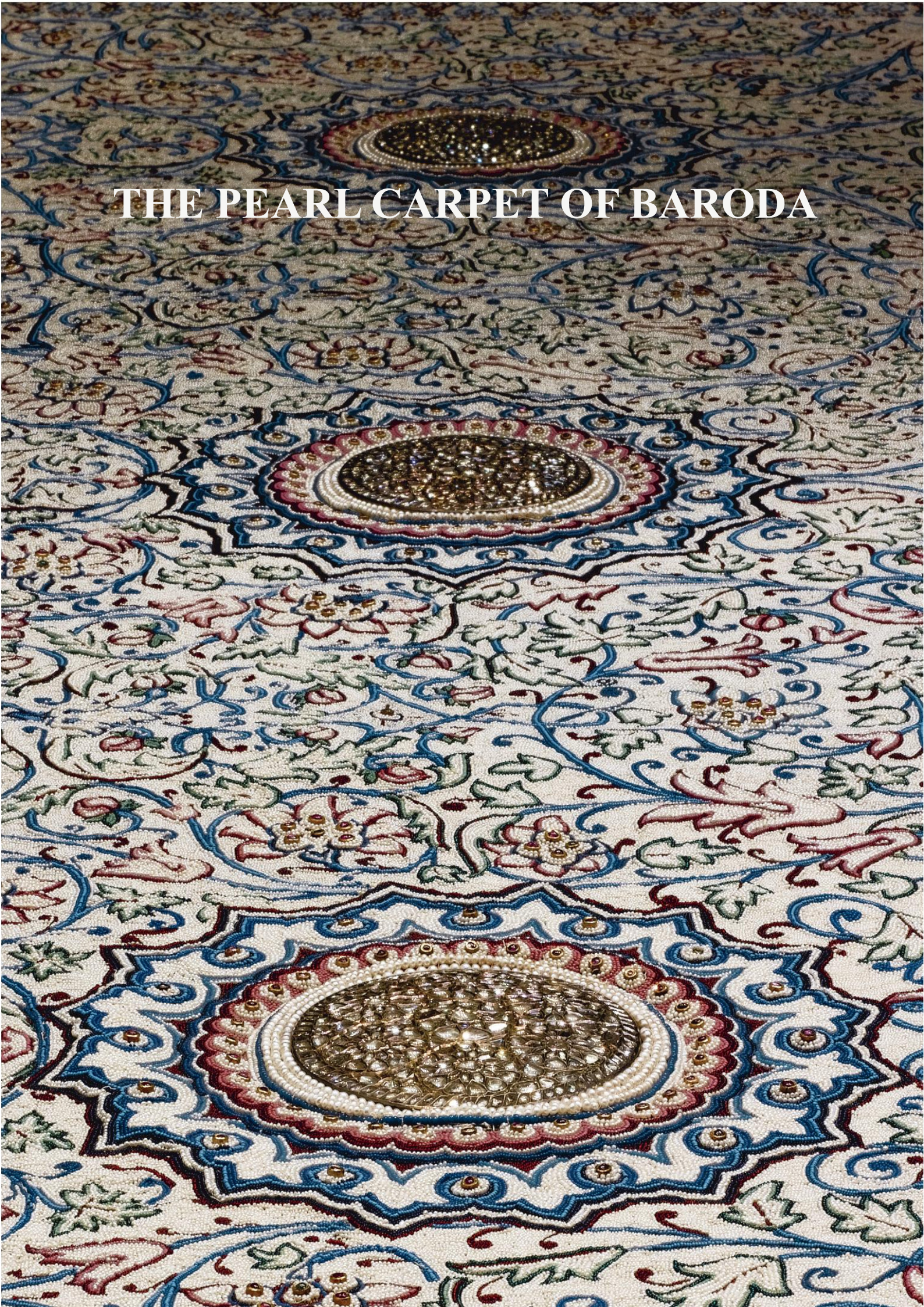


THE PEARL CARPET OF BARODA



THE PEARL CARPET OF BARODA, GUJARAT, INDIA



DESCRIPTION

approximately 173 by 264cm., 5ft. 8in. by 8ft. 8in.

circa 1865

The foundation of silk and fine deer hide is densely embroidered overall with a design worked in strings of natural 'Basra' pearls, measuring approximately 1-3mm, and English coloured glass beads. There are on average 78 pearls and beads per vertical dm. (10cm.), and 68 per horizontal dm., equalling a density of c.4,990 pearls and beads per dm². The total area of the carpet is c.45,670cm.² Making allowance for the three large diamond filled rosettes (c.440cm²), the 32 smaller rosettes (c.400cm²), and the smaller gems the total area embroidered with pearls and beads is about 44,500cm². Therefore, over 2.2 million pearls and beads have been used to decorate the field. In our estimation, the number of pearls employed in the design is therefore at least 1.2-1.5 million. The rosettes are circled by small natural 'Basra' pearls of slightly larger size, measuring approximately 3-4 mm; the total estimated weight of the pearls is 30,000 carats. The designs worked in the rosettes are set with approximately 2,500 table cut and occasional rose cut diamonds, approximately 350-400 carats in total, all set in silver topped gold or possibly blackened gold; the motifs are further enhanced with foil backed rubies, emeralds and sapphires.

ESTIMATE Estimate Upon Request

Lot Sold: 5,458,500 USD

PROVENANCE

The Maharaja of Baroda, Gaekwar Khande Rao

by descent to

The Maharani of Baroda, Sita Devi

Seethadevi Holding until 1988

EXHIBITED

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, India!, September 14, 1985 to January 5, 1986

Indian Art Exhibition, Delhi, 1902-1903

LITERATURE AND REFERENCES

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CATALOGUE NOTE

The Pearl Carpet of Baroda A Royal Commission: The Making of a Legend

The Pearl Carpet of Baroda is an extraordinary work of art that is a true testament to the wealth, sophistication, and grandeur of the legendary courts of the maharajas as well as an extant example of the fabled riches of India. Embroidered with as many as one and a half million of the fabled 'Basra' pearls, which were harvested in the southern Gulf region and along the coasts of Qatar and Bahrain, and embellished with diamonds, sapphires, emeralds and rubies, this piece has been known throughout the past 150 years as the Pearl Carpet of Baroda. Named after its patron, the lot offered here was commissioned circa 1865 by Gaekwar Khande Rao, the Maharaja of Baroda (r.1856 – 1870); reputedly originally intended as a gift for the tomb of Mohammed at Medina, it is one of the most iconic masterpieces of Indian craftsmanship known today. Instantly legendary, this work of art is mentioned by foreign travellers as early as 1880. The exquisite execution, the remarkable state of preservation, the unquestionable rarity, and the highly unusual combination of form and material make this piece undeniably one of the most remarkable objects ever created.

Baroda: A Land of Dynasties

The family ruling over Baroda, a state of approximately 8300 square miles about 250 miles north of Mumbai, has a long a history going back some 2000 years in time. The city of Baroda itself was first mentioned in historical accounts in the early ninth century. Over the centuries the region was controlled by different powers, including the Gupta Empire, the Chalukya Dynasty, and the Solanki Rajputs. Hindu kings ruled here until the thirteenth century, when the Solanki lords were defeated by the Delhi sultans who were themselves later overthrown by forces of the Mughal Empire in the sixteenth century. During the Mughal era (1526-1857), ongoing warfare characterized the region as local Marathas, an Indo-Aryan caste of Hindu warriors, resisted the new power and fought for their territories. By the eighteenth century the Marathas had secured control over the region, even resisting British forces from the west. Eventually, the ever-growing British presence in India became overwhelming, and after the First, Second, and Third Anglo-Maratha Wars the Maratha Empire was turned into a principality of the British Raj in 1818. From their defeat until 1948 the Gaekwars remained rulers of Baroda, although the *de facto* power was in British hands. After the formation of present-day India, Baroda became part of Gujarat.¹

During the British era, industries flourished in Baroda and the state maintained its role as a cultural centre. It was during this period that Khande Rao ascended to the throne as the Maharaja Gaekwar of Baroda in 1865 and established a court that was renowned throughout the subcontinent for its sophistication and richness. The new maharaja was known for his love of display and magnificence, and generous patronage of the arts and architecture. He had a special fondness for jewels and acquired some of the most magnificent gemstones known to the world, such as 128-carat "Star of the South" diamond.²



Opulence and Tradition: Art at the Maratha Court

During the second half of the nineteenth century, art-loving Indian lords such as Khande Rao had access to some of the most talented artists who had previously worked for the Mughal court. Due to the strong political and cultural ties between the subcontinent's Muslim empire and Persia, the oeuvre of Mughal artists had been influenced by Safavid art. As a result, a distinct Mughal style emerged that was an amalgamation of Persian and indigenous Indian traditions. After the decline of the Mughal Empire, these royal craftsmen were left without a dependable income as there was no central power with well-established courts able to employ such a highly-trained and expensive workforce. Jewellers and gem cutters were among those displaced court-artists forced to seek new patrons at the smaller, but still very lavish, households of local rulers. As these artists came from a distinct artistic tradition, their work retained strong characteristics of the old regime and the art commissioned by their new patrons was strongly influenced by traditional Mughal aesthetics. This was true for the products of both jewellers and weavers who created works that exhibited characteristics of Persian art. Textile art, particularly embroidery and brocade weaving, had a long-standing tradition in Baroda and many former imperial craftsmen engaged in that trade found a new home at the Maratha court. Gem-cutters and jewellers were particularly welcome at court not only because Baroda was one of the richest of all states in the subcontinent, but also because of the old Indian court tradition of giving expensive gifts.³ Western travellers throughout the centuries noted that many Indian rulers presented lavish gifts to their visitors, courtiers, religious institutions, and even the poor. The tradition of gift-giving and the love for precious gems, coupled with a solid financial background, enabled maharajas and local lords to offer the most lavish gifts, often trying to outshine each other. During his journey to India, the British traveller John Hawkins noted that during a court visit pearls, coral, and amber were given to courtiers and holy men.⁴ He also witnessed the ritual of ceremonial giving when observing the emperor handing out gold and silver to the poor, while the Frenchman François Bernier recalled the precious royal gifts amassed at the mosques of the empire.⁵ In such a generous culture the most unusual and lavish objects were executed by court craftsmen in order to express the sophistication of the patron and to impress and dazzle not only the receiver of the gift but also those witnessing the presentation. With its overwhelming beauty and astonishing value, the Pearl



Bejewelled Textiles: An Ancient Tradition

Bejewelled textiles embellished with metallic thread and precious and semi-precious gems were not unknown in the eastern world. Weavings decorated in such manner were kept in very high regard not only in India but also in Safavid Persia and Ottoman Turkey. The prestige of these textiles is illustrated in a portrait of Mehmet II, one of the most powerful rulers of the early modern ages, where Gentile Bellini (1429-1507) depicted the Sultan in an architectural niche partially covered with a bejewelled weaving whose embroidery echoes the Renaissance bas-relief carving of the arch framing the sitter.⁶ The earliest known bejewelled carpets, adorned with pearls, jewels, and gold, date from the Sassanian period (226-636) in Persia.⁷ According to Pope, the rugs in Khusraw II's (590-628) throne room in the palace at Ctesiphon were "said to have been made of gold-woven fabrics with pearls embroidered on them."⁸ The largest carpet, which represented a garden in full bloom, in Khusraw II's palace was even more elaborately decorated with gemstones and was called the Spring of Khusraw or Winter Carpet.⁹ Later, fables from *The Thousand and One Nights* also mention carpets decorated with pearls, rubies, and turquoise, not unlike the weaving in the portrait by Bellini, from the times of the Abassid Caliphate (750-1258).¹⁰ The Pearl Carpet of Baroda is an exceptional 19th century revival of this ancient form. Existing examples of nineteenth-century Indian textile art show the continuity of the tradition of embellishing fabrics with three-dimensional adornments. For lengths of dress material from the 1850s decorated with metallic thread and pieces of sparkling beetle wing, an inexpensive alternative to gemstones, see Rosemary Crill, *Indian Embroidery*, London, 1999, figs. 62 and 64, pp. 70-73.



A Legendary Masterpiece: Eyewitness Accounts

From the earliest mentions of The Pearl Carpet of Baroda, it has impressed writers as an extraordinary work of art. Most literature states that this remarkable work was commissioned by the then Maharaja of Baroda, Khande Rao, in 1865 with the intention that it be given to adorn the tomb of Mohammed at Medina. In 1880, George M. Birdwood wrote:

"But the most wonderful piece of embroidery ever known was the chaddar or veil made by order of Kunde Rao, the late Gaekwar of Baroda, for the tomb of Mahommed [sic] at Medina. It was composed entirely of inwrought pearls and precious stones, disposed in an arabesque pattern, and is said to have cost a *crore* (10 million) rupees. Although the richest stones were worked into it, the effect was most harmonious. When spread out in the sun it seemed suffused with a general iridescent pearly bloom, as grateful to the eyes as were the exquisite forms of its arabesques."¹¹

This carpet and a round one of similar work were exhibited at the Delhi Exhibition of Indian Art, 1902-3. In his book entitled *Indian Art at Delhi*, Sir George Watt notes:

"Perhaps if any one article could be singled out as more freely discussed at the Exhibition than any other, it would be the Pearl carpet of Baroda. The circular portion shown in the Plate [see page x of this catalogue] was probably originally intended as the veil or canopy, and the rectangular carpet shown on the walls of the Loan Collection Gallery close by is one of the four such pieces that are said to have formed the carpet. --- The field is in seed pearls, the arabesque design in blue and red being worked out in English glass beads with medallions and rosettes of diamonds, rubies, emeralds, freely dispersed. To place on the four corners of the carpet were constructed four large weights in solid gold thickly set with diamonds. One of these weights will be seen hard by the carpet. Needless to add, this superb gift never went to Mecca." ¹²

From this we learn that the 'carpet' offered here is one of a suite that originally consisted of four rectangular pieces, a circular piece and four finials. All of these together may have formed a structure that would be carried in the procession between Mecca and Medina with it then being given to the treasury of the mosque.¹³ As Bernier wrote, Khande Rao would also be following a Mughal tradition in this generous donation, possibly with the desire to relate his own sophistication and wealth to those of the Mughal emperors. Another visitor to the palace, the Reverend Edward St. Clair Weeden, whose account *A Year with the Gaekwar of Baroda*, was published in 1909, describes being shown "four great squares, each as large as a fair-sized carpet,...[which] hung on the walls, apparently of tapestry. Closer inspection showed that they consisted entirely of jewels---pearls, emeralds, rubies, diamonds and so on..." ¹⁴ By this time the 'carpet' was not on the floor, but hung in the palace of the Maharaja. Indeed, this pearl covered, jewel inlaid 'carpet' would not seem to be the most appropriate floor covering. However, by 1914, when E. L. Tottenham visited the Palace, he noted that only one of the rectangular carpets was still remaining :

"Upon the wall hung the oblong [rectangular]-shaped and famous pearl carpet ... It was made in duplicate, the first to be dispatched to Mecca to go over the Tomb of Mohammed. This one now only remained. Its value at the time of making was 68,500 rupees, but this day it was worth 2 lakhs. The piece consisted of three big diamond-set flowers along the middle portion, and thirty-three {sic.} smaller flowers along the border; in the floral design are 1,269 rubies and 596 emeralds. The remaining portion of the carpet, in size 6 feet by 10 feet, is made of seed pearls, except the blue, green and red lines in the floral design, which are of coloured glass beads." ¹⁵

While Kande Rao was himself a Hindu, several writers suggest that he ordered the suite to be given to a mosque in a show of his respect and admiration for Islam.¹⁶ Weeden also notes that the Maharajah died before the gift could be sent to Medina and his successors did not feel compelled to carry out his wishes. Maharaja Gaekwar Khande Rao died in 1870 implying the carpet had been completed by then. He died of natural causes, having survived an attempt made on his life by his brother Mulhar Rao who had tried to kill him with a concoction of crushed diamonds.¹⁷ It has also been suggested that it may have been his brother who was responsible for commissioning the pearl carpet for a local temple and which he then decided to keep.¹⁸ This is the only mention of the carpet having been ordered by anyone other than Khande Rao. Both maharajas were known for their love of luxury but Khande Rao was particularly passionate about jewels, as evidenced by his 1867 purchase of the "Star of the South," one of the largest diamonds in the world. The diamond, the surviving rectangular carpet and the circular canopy remained in the Gaekwar family collection, and were amongst the pieces in her personal collection which Maharani Sita Devi, wife of the then maharajah, Gaekwar Pratapsingh Rao, brought with her when she moved to Monaco in 1946.

The Pearl Carpet of Baroda: A Revival of Mughal Splendour

The design of the carpet appears to harken back to Mughal tradition with the vinery forming three arches, each above a large diamond-filled roundel and topped with an elegant palmette. An example of an antecedent design can be found in a pair of Mughal saphs with three arches and palmette finials in the Keir collection.¹⁹ The elaborate swirling vinery and dense floral elements more closely resemble the 18th century millefleurs designs of the very finely woven pashmina shawls and rugs of Northern India. For examples of such delicate weavings see Daniel Walker, *Flowers Underfoot: Indian Carpets of the Mughal Era*, New York, 1998, figs. 127 and 128, pp. 130-131.

This legendary carpet would be mentioned whenever a Maharaja of Baroda was the subject of an article, for example that of Michael White, writing in the *New York Times*, May 13, 1906, "How Maharaja Gaekwar Became Ruler of Baroda," he states that:

"Maharaja Gaekwar possesses the most costly piece of jewelry in the world. In dazzling magnificence, it never has been, or is ever likely to be, excelled. This treasure is in the form of a shawl or cloak of woven pearls, edged with a deep border of arabesque designs of diamonds, rubies, emeralds and sapphires."

The Pearl Carpet of Baroda reflects the confluence of many Indian decorative traditions in addition to being one of the most luxuriant works of art ever created. But its allure lies not only in the richness of the materials from which it was made: as Stuart Cary Welch writes:

"However unbridled the opulence of its million pearls of excellent quality, of its fine diamonds, rubies, and emeralds beyond count, the design is suitably restrained and dignified, a classic arabesque descended from the Mughal tradition and probably inspired by the legendary jewelled covering ordered by Shah Jahan to adorn the cenotaph of Mumtaz-Mahal in the Taj Mahal. If one approaches with an eye only for worldly delight, or even amusement, one soon backs off, sensing the degree of underlying seriousness and religious devotion."²⁰ It seems very likely that this carpet was commissioned in imitation of the Mughal bejewelled coverlet woven for the tomb of Mumtaz-Mahal at the Taj Mahal. A ruler as grand and powerful as Shah Jahan would most certainly have been an inspiration for a Maharaja such as Khande Rao. In the Pearl Carpet of Baroda a work of art was created that has captured the imagination of viewers for over a century to such an extent that its appeal transcends the use of pearls and gems and it remains a singular masterpiece and true reflection of the splendour of the Maharajas.

'Basra Pearls': A Princely Preference

Besides being a magnificent manifestation of the taste and power of the maharajas, the Pearl Carpet of Baroda is also a reminder of the flourishing pearl-trade between the Indian subcontinent and the Arabian Gulf. For over two millennia, pearl fishing was a steady source of income for the people living in the area surrounding the delta of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The first-century geographer Isidorus Characenus noted in his work entitled *Journey Around Parthia* that the majority of the inhabitants of the city of Charax Spasinou, capital of the Kingdom of Characene, then part of the Parthian Empire, supported themselves by diving for pearls.²¹ Throughout the following centuries, locals from the Gulf region traded extensively with merchants from all around Asia and Europe, with their most reliable buyers coming from India. By the seventeenth century, most of the pearls harvested in the southern Gulf region and along the Arabian coast eventually ended up in the treasuries of the Indian elite who, as great lovers of gems and pearls, used them to adorn their lavish jewellery, decorative art objects, and textiles. The pearl trade dominated the Gulf's economy and reached its golden age in the mid-nineteenth century. Some of the highest quality pearls were discovered at this time and were then sold in Basra, centre of the trade, mostly to Indian merchants.²² Due to the excellence and abundance of the pieces exported from Basra, pearls from the Gulf region were known as 'Basra pearls' throughout the world. Between the 1850s and the early twentieth century, the vast majority of the pearls utilized by Indian jewellers were 'Basra pearls.' The Pearl Carpet of Baroda is the apotheosis of the Indian love of these pearls, its scintillating surface composed of countless 'Basra pearls.' To execute such a unique and precious object Khande Rao chose the best raw materials to match the unparalleled craftsmanship of artists he commissioned to execute this extraordinary work of art. Completely covering such a large surface with the most valued type of pearls, a meticulous work that took years to complete, clearly indicates that the Maharaja of Baroda only accepted the very best in design, craftsmanship and material.

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